

## Definitions: Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Sexual Prejudice

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People with homosexual or bisexual orientations have long been stigmatized. With the rise of the gay political movement in the late 1960s, however, homosexuality's condemnation as immoral, criminal, and sick came under increasing scrutiny. When the American Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality as a psychiatric diagnosis in 1973, the question of why some heterosexuals harbor strongly negative attitudes toward homosexuals began to receive serious scientific consideration.

**Homophobia** Society's rethinking of sexual orientation was crystallized in the term *homophobia*, which heterosexual psychologist George Weinberg coined in the late 1960s. Weinberg used homophobia to label heterosexuals' dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals as well as homosexuals' self loathing. The word first appeared in print in 1969 and was subsequently discussed at length in Weinberg's 1972 book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1992 edition) defines homophobia as "aversion to gay or homosexual people or their lifestyle or culture" and "behavior or an act based on this aversion." Other definitions identify homophobia as an *irrational* fear of homosexuality.

**Heterosexism** Around the same time, *heterosexism* began to be used as a term analogous to sexism and racism, describing an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community ([Herek, 1990](#)). Using the term *heterosexism* highlights the parallels between antigay sentiment and other forms of prejudice, such as racism, antisemitism, and sexism.

Like institutional racism and sexism, heterosexism pervades societal customs and institutions. It operates through a dual process of invisibility and attack. Homosexuality usually remains culturally invisible; when people who engage in homosexual behavior or who are identified as homosexual become visible, they are subject to attack by society.

Examples of heterosexism in the United States include the continuing ban against lesbian and gay military personnel; widespread lack of legal protection from antigay discrimination in employment, housing, and services; hostility to lesbian and gay committed relationships, recently dramatized by passage of federal and state laws against same-gender marriage; and the existence of sodomy laws in more than one-third of the states.

Although usage of the two words has not been uniform, homophobia has typically been employed to describe individual antigay attitudes and behaviors whereas heterosexism has referred to societal-level ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of non-heterosexual people.

**Limitations** By drawing popular and scientific attention to antigay hostility, the creation of these terms marked a watershed. Nevertheless, they have important limitations.

Critics have observed that *homophobia* is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, empirical research does not indicate that heterosexuals' antigay attitudes can reasonably be considered a *phobia* in the clinical sense. Indeed, the limited data available suggest that many heterosexuals who express hostility toward gay men and lesbians do *not* manifest the physiological reactions to homosexuality that are associated with other phobias

(see [Shields & Harriman, 1984](#)).

Second, using *homophobia* implies that antigay prejudice is an individual, clinical entity rather than a social phenomenon rooted in cultural ideologies and intergroup relations. Moreover, a phobia is usually experienced as dysfunctional and unpleasant. Antigay prejudice, however, is often highly functional for the heterosexuals who manifest it.

As antigay attitudes have become increasingly central to conservative political and religious ideologies since the 1980s, these limitations have become more problematic. However, *heterosexism*, with its historic macro-level focus on cultural ideologies rather than individual attitudes, is not a satisfactory replacement for homophobia.

**Sexual Prejudice** Scientific analysis of the psychology of antigay attitudes will be facilitated by a new term. *Sexual prejudice* serves this purpose nicely. Broadly conceived, sexual prejudice refers to all negative attitudes based on sexual orientation, whether the target is homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Given the current social organization of sexuality, however, such prejudice is almost always directed at people who engage in homosexual behavior or label themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual ([Herek, 2000](#)).

Like other types of prejudice, sexual prejudice has three principal features:

- It is an attitude (i.e., an evaluation or judgment).
- It is directed at a social group and its members.
- It is negative, involving hostility or dislike.

Conceptualizing heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward homosexuality and bisexuality as sexual prejudice – rather than homophobia – has several advantages. First, sexual prejudice is a descriptive term. Unlike homophobia, it conveys no a priori assumptions about the origins, dynamics, and underlying motivations of antigay attitudes.

Second, the term explicitly links the study of antigay hostility with the rich tradition of social psychological research on prejudice.

Third, using the construct of sexual prejudice does not require value judgments that antigay attitudes are inherently irrational or evil.

**References** Herek, G. M. (1990). The context of anti-gay violence: Notes on cultural and psychological heterosexism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5, 316-333.

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